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UNCLAS BRATISLAVA 001064

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR OES, EUR/NCE, EUR/PPD AND EUR/ACE
DEPT PASS AID FOR EEE AND OSDA
AGRICULTURE PASS TO FOREST SERVICE
DEPT PASS EPA FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: HURRICANE FORCE WINDS FLATTEN SLOVAK FORESTS, GOS
SEEKS INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

1. SUMMARY AND ACTION REQUEST. ON NOVEMBER 19, THE WORST WINDS IN 70 YEARS STRUCK SLOVAKIA'S HIGH TATRAS ALPINE FOREST AREA, SNAPPING TREES LIKE TOOTHPICKS. AN AREA OF APPROXIMATELY 250 SQUARE MILES WAS DEVASTATED, INCLUDING LARGE SWATHS OF LAND WHERE NEARLY ALL TREES WERE DESTROYED. ALTHOUGH ONLY TWO FATALITIES HAVE BEEN REPORTED AND MOST BUILDINGS SURVIVED, CONSIDERABLE ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC DAMAGE ARE LIKELY. GOS HAS SOUGHT INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE IN DEALING WITH THIS DISASTER, AND DONATIONS FROM INTERNATIONAL AND PRIVATE DONORS HAVE ALREADY BEEN RECEIVED. HOWEVER, THE SLOVAKS ARE NOT CERTAIN HOW TO PROCEED AND WOULD LIKELY WELCOME ADVICE FROM U.S. EXPERTS. POST SEEKS DEPT GUIDANCE ON TWO PROPOSED RESPONSES:

-- A USD 25,000 DONATION FROM THE AMBASSADOR'S DISCRETIONARY EMERGENCY FUND, AND

-- A DVC CONFERENCE BETWEEN USG AND GOS OFFICIALS TO SHARE U.S. EXPERIENCE AND SUGGESTIONS FROM SIMILAR CIRCUMSTANCES.

END SUMMARY AND ACTION REQUEST.

2. Winds of 100 mph destroyed a heavily forested area more than 40 miles long and 6 miles wide in north-central Slovakia. The Minister of Agriculture estimates that 2.5 to 3 million cubic meters of timber have fallen, equal to about 90 percent of Slovakia's yearly production of soft wood. Large sections of electrical lines were completely destroyed, but roads and buildings apparently survived fairly well.

3. The GOS has called in the army to help remove debris and requested financial assistance from the EU to help restore the area. Businesses and local governments have also donated funds to restore what had been one of Slovakia's national treasures. The timing of the disaster is especially difficult for the local economy, which is highly dependent on tourism including skiing. Ecological damage is expected to be exacerbated by run-off in the spring. We request fiscal data to support a USD 25,000 pledge from the Ambassador's discretionary emergency fund to contribute to reconstruction activities.

4. Although Slovakia has been fortunate in avoiding an immediate humanitarian disaster, many hardships are sure to affect this region for the foreseeable future. However, at this point the Slovaks aren't even sure what help they need and what questions to ask in order to begin the recovery effort. Post requests Dept seek advice from USG agencies related to forestry, environmental protection and aid issues to identify U.S. experts who could offer advice regarding restoration efforts and potential long-term problems, and where to start. Post would then place a formal request for a DVC.

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